



Complicating narratives of women's food and nutrition insecurity: Domestic violence in rural Bangladesh

Erin C. Lentz

LBJ School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 12 November 2017

Available online 22 December 2017

Keywords:

Food insecurity
Nutrition
Domestic violence
Agency
Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

A rich body of research confirms a strong association between a mother's exposure to domestic violence and poor nutritional outcomes of her children. However, there is less empirical research on *how* domestic violence impacts nutrition and food security. Two pathways described in the literature are (1) perpetrators withhold food as a form violence or control, leading to poor nutrition of women and (2) women's food preparation and portion allocation trigger "retaliatory" violence by perpetrators. Interviews by community researchers with over 100 women in rural Bangladesh reveal a little documented linkage between violence and food practices in rural Bangladesh. I find that women, in light of the realities and possibilities of domestic violence, weigh choices about food consumption and distribution, often choosing to eat less or lower quality foods. That is, women often demonstrate agentic decision-making in a context of violence, referred to here as "burdened agency." Women traverse and navigate a complex set of relationships between hunger, undernutrition, agency and domestic violence, differing from the two presumed-causal pathways. Recognizing burdened agency can explain how women make decisions around food practices, and why the uptake of certain food security and nutrition interventions may be reduced.

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1. Introduction

This paper shows that rural Bangladeshi women, living in communities with high rates of domestic violence, navigate a complex set of relationships between violence, food, and undernutrition. It argues that engaging with this decision making is critically important for understanding causes and consequences of food and nutrition insecurity, and domestic violence. To make this case, I draw on 110 interviews with women in rural Bangladesh. These interviews show that in some cases, women expose themselves to violence by requesting more to eat. Other women limit their consumption of food or eat less nutritious foods in an attempt to avoid violence, thereby undermining their own nutritional status. Understanding these choices as *burdened decisions* allows us to move beyond narrow binaries and "pathway" approaches to nutrition and domestic violence and opens a broader discussions of the ways that women navigate abuse and hunger in rural households.

Much of the literature linking violence and nutrition implicitly conceptualizes women living with violence as falling into one of two categories. First, there are heroic individuals who leave, thereby eliminating the risk of violence-related health and nutrition effects. Second, there are passive survivors of violence who

remain in violent relationships, exposing themselves to hunger and nutritional risk. This binary of "women who exit" and "women who stay" erases most types of agency.¹ Many women in rural Bangladesh live with domestic violence, particularly as there are few viable options to exit violent marriages (Schuler, Bates, & Islam, 2008; Kabeer, 2011; Bellows, Lemke, Jenderedjian, & Scherbaum, 2015). As Bellows et al. (2015) note, "Rural domestic violence might be tolerated by women as a lesser danger than poverty and social isolation" (p. 1208).

Yet, a framing of passive suffering versus active exit limits our capacity to understand more complicated relationships between domestic violence and food and nutrition security. Moreover, it also risks closing off potential avenues for more effectively engaging women's nutritional issues through policy and programming interventions. In contrast to this "two-victim paradigm," I examine the ways that women living with domestic violence demonstrate agency, albeit "burdened" (Meyers, 2011). Women in highly constrained environments make choices that help them navigate violence but that also affect their own nutrition and food security. These strategies, not well-documented in the existing literature,

¹ This binary is not uncommon in broader debates, contemporary and historical, over gender (e.g., Mani, 1987).

E-mail address: erinclentz@utexas.edu

reveal the complex tradeoffs women make and the limitations they face.

To better understand these strategies, I partnered with a Bangladeshi civil society organization, Nijera Kori, to undertake community-based research. We trained landless laborers (both women and men) who are Nijera Kori members in qualitative, ethnographic community research techniques. The community researchers subsequently conducted 134 interviews with residents of their own communities about intra-household relations around food and gender. As these interviews show, women's decisions around family and personal nutrition reveal a complex and occasionally violent terrain that cannot be understood through the binary of passive suffering or exit.

2. Literature

Often, food security (e.g., reduced coping strategies index) and nutritional outcomes (e.g., household dietary diversity scores) are measured at the household-level using proxy variables even though individual-level measures are more appropriate (Jones, Ngure, Pelto, & Young, 2013). When studies do address individual outcomes, most, though not all, focus on child nutritional status rather than that of women (e.g., see Smith & Haddad, 2015). Focusing on the status of women helps to identify crucial possibilities for improving both their lives and nutritional access (Bellows & Jenderedjian, 2016).

Many Bangladeshi women live at the intersection of violence and food and nutrition insecurity. In Bangladesh, 30 percent of women experience chronic energy deficiency (lower than normal body mass) (Ahmed et al., 2012). As of 2007, 61 percent of Bangladeshi women report experiencing domestic violence at least once in their lives (Fakir, Anjum, Bushra, & Nawar, 2016).² Much of the research on the intersection between nutrition and domestic violence examines the correlates of violence and the effects of violence on health and nutrition outcomes. Domestic violence can have lasting effects on nutrition and health. Yount, DiGirolamo, and Ramakrishnan (2011), for example, review studies of children's exposure to domestic violence, finding some evidence that violence against women contributes to adverse nutritional outcomes for their children (see also Sethuraman, Lansdown, & Sullivan, 2006; Ackerson & Subramanian, 2008; Asling-Monemi, Naved, & Persson, 2009; Dalal, Rahman, & Jansson, 2009). There is less evidence addressing women's own nutritional and food security outcomes, and much of the evidence on health and violence is associational rather than causal (Temmerman, 2015).

A rich, primarily quantitative literature explores the correlates and or triggers of domestic violence and intimate partner violence (IPV) in South Asia.³ Weitzman (2014) identifies several risk factors associated with domestic violence in India, including a married woman's age, education and earning relative to her partner, and alcohol usage by her partner. Rao (1997) finds low dowries associated with abuse. He points out that in South India, some people perceive IPV as a legitimate response to spousal "misbehaviour", such as neglecting cooking duties. Researchers have also considered the role of economic factors in mitigating or exacerbating violence. Bhuiya, Sharmin, and Hanifi (2003) indicate that, in Bangladesh, microcredit loans can increase the odds of violence (see also Cons & Paprocki,

2010). Agarwal and Panda (2007) argue that in India while evidence of employment status and violence is mixed, property status provides an important deterrent to violence. Women with property have opportunities to exit the relationship, because they literally have somewhere to go. More broadly, in a 44-country study, Heise and Kotsdam (2015) find domestic violence is higher in countries with structural factors, such as norms about justified wife beating and male authority over females and laws, that disadvantage women's access to land and property. Notably, most of this literature is associational. A recent exception is a study by Hidrobo and Fernald (2013) that finds, in a randomized control trial in Ecuador, that cash transfers have differential effects on violence, based on the relative levels of education of women and their partners.

2.1. Pathways between violence and nutrition

The literature on violence and nutrition raises two common potential pathways—simple causal relations between two events—by which violence against women affects nutrition of either children or their mothers (See Fig. 1). In the first, food preparation, the division of food, and or lack of food triggers violence (Rao, 1997). Jeffery, Jeffery, and Lyon (1989) describe, in rural Uttar Pradesh, a "man who suspects his wife of withholding food or purposely making it unattractive is likely to beat her" (p. 56). Hartmann and Boyce (2013 (1983)) quote one woman who links hunger with violence: "when my husband's stomach is empty, he beats me, but when it's full, there is peace" (p. 120). Bellows et al. (2015) document retaliatory violence against women for food that is burned, not tasty, or otherwise not prepared to the expected standard. It is important to clarify that burning food, for example, is a "trigger" (or excuse) – not a cause – of violence.

The second pathway involves withholding food as part of a broader set of violent practices that cause adverse nutritional outcomes (Ackerson & Subramanian, 2008; Dalal et al., 2009; Yount et al., 2011; Bellows et al., 2015). Ackerson and Subramanian (2008) write, "Perpetrators of domestic violence often use several types of power . . . [such as withholding of food] to control behavior of their family members." (p. 1192). Bellows et al. (2015) write, "Household power over food is shown to be exercised to punish women" (p. 1199). The punishment of women can, in severe cases, have direct nutritional effects; an inadequate amount of food to eat over a long enough time can lead to undernourishment. Violence can also lead to stress, depression, and adverse physiological and psychological outcomes for women and their children, which can indirectly affect nutrition.⁴

Much of this literature is comprised of cross-sectional quantitative studies of associations (Temmerman, 2015). Thus, the pathways linking nutrition and domestic violence are often hypothesized rather than observed or reported. One consequence of hypothesizing pathways is the tendency to understand correlations emerging from cross-sectional work as causal. Discussions of how women negotiate their domestic spaces are absent, undoubtedly because women's agency is hard to discern in quantitative work. Even when using the more agentic language of survivors,⁵

⁴ Even when food is not directly withheld, residing in violent households can harm health and wellbeing (Temmerman, 2015). The psychological stress of living in a violent household can induce physiological changes in women that can exacerbate malnutrition (Ackerson & Subramanian, 2008; Sethuraman et al., 2006). Psychological stress and depression can also result in poor care practices and risky behaviors (Yount et al., 2011). These pathways involve changes that are not directly observable, and I focus on the two pathways described above.

⁵ Mirroring the broader literature on domestic violence, literature on domestic violence and nutrition tends to describe women as "survivors," recognizing that women who stay in violent relationships have a continuum of agency (Dunn, 2005a, 2005b). Nonetheless, few nutrition and violence studies focus on day-to-day practices of agency by survivors.

² Ziaei, Naved, and Ekström (2014) find that about 50 percent of women with at least one child experience domestic violence during their lives; United Nations Statistics (2015) reports that as of 2011, 67 percent of Bangladeshi women have experienced sexual and or physical violence by their partners. For comparison, globally, 35 percent of women have experienced domestic violence (UN Women, 2015).

³ Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers specifically to violence against women by their partners. Domestic violence, more broadly, includes violence perpetrated by any household member.

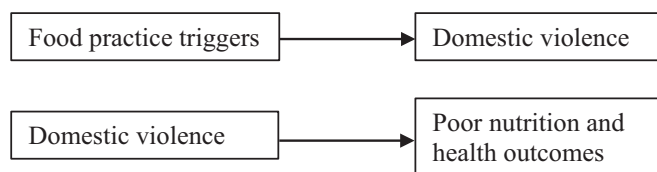


Fig. 1. Two pathways linking food, nutrition, and domestic violence.

the pathway approach implies a straightforward causality: perpetrators withhold food as a form of violence or commit violence in response to some sort of food-related trigger. Women are acted upon: passive sufferers of nutritional disempowerment and violence. This erases a range of tactics that women use to navigate food and nutrition questions in the household.

Qualitative approaches can shed light on how women make conscious choices about their food and nutrition security within a context of violence. My research suggests these tactics are important both to nutritional outcomes and, potentially, to interventions related to food and nutrition security. Attending to agency, thus, does more than simply “add nuance” to explanatory models. It opens a different set of critical questions about how women navigate violence and food and nutrition in their everyday lives.

2.2. Burdened agency

Women living with violent partners make quotidian decisions that impact their own and their children’s wellbeing. Respondents describe managing their food practices to avoid violence. That is, women use tactics, in de Certeau’s sense of the term, to navigate these pathways (de Certeau, 1984). De Certeau distinguished between strategies, a terrain imposed and organized by a top-down powers (e.g., the state, patriarchal structures, NGOs, etc.) and tactics. Tactics describe the ways that people with little power to set the rules of the game negotiate these strategies. They are an “art of the weak” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). Perpetrators of domestic violence can control power relations and domestic space, while women in violent relationships can often only respond with more limited measures. As de Certeau suggests, tactics are navigations of power structures rather than dramatic mechanisms of immediate change. That said, tactics are significant to everyday outcomes and may cause slower – but no less important – transformations over time (see also Kabeer, 2011 on situated empowerment). Engaging with these tactics reveals women as active participants in decisions over nutrition and food, even in contexts of violence.

Burdened agency, a concept proposed by Meyers (2011) to understand trafficking of women, highlights how women make these tactical choices within violent contexts. Meyers shows that some women, with few alternatives, *choose* to be smuggled for sex-trafficking. These women are not entirely guileless victims, nor are they “heroic” for making such a choice. In fact, they often make these decisions out of desperation for their children or for other pressing reasons. As she explains, “The coping measures people take . . . are amalgams of rational choice and “no other choice”—instances, as it were, of coerced free agency” (Meyers, 2011, pp. 263–264). She writes, “Burdened agency acknowledges that victims cannot escape from powers that inflict or threaten to inflict needless and terrible suffering on them, but it doesn’t strip them of the agentic complexity and resilience that are characteristic of humanity” (Meyers, 2011, p. 268).

The concept of burdened agency allows for a variety of agentic actions beyond the “two-victim paradigm” of passive victims and heroic survivors. In a two-victim paradigm, the agency of women who have been knowingly trafficked and who often made this

choice given few better alternatives are illegible. This is consonant with suggesting that women who stay in violent relationships do so because of “learned helplessness,” rather than because of highly constrained choice sets (Dunn, 2005a, 2005b).

In contrast, burdened agency provides a language for understanding decision-making beyond heroic “exit” or passive suffering. It suggests a continuum of agency, reflecting that women may be more or less burdened in different aspects of their lives and over their life courses.

2.3. Bangladesh context: nutrition, norms, and domestic violence

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Roughly the size of the state of Louisiana, 66% of its population of 160 million people reside in rural areas (World Bank, 2016). 26 percent of the population continues to live on less than \$2/day, and as of 2010, 31.5 percent of the population was below the national poverty line. Nonetheless, Bangladesh has recently made remarkable strides in combatting child undernutrition (Headey, Hoddinot, Ali, Tesfaye, & Dereje, 2015). Between 1997 and 2011, the stunting rates (abnormally low height for age) of children under age five dropped from 58.5 percent to 40.2 percent (Headey et al., 2015). There is less research about undernutrition of women and men in Bangladesh, although data from 2007 indicate that 30 percent of women face chronic energy deficiency and 40 percent of pregnant women are anemic (Ahmed et al., 2012).

An important cultural and social factor influencing the nutrition of women is what Cain, Khanam, and Nahar (1979) refer to as “patriarchal risk.” Many women are dependent on the guardianship of a male family member (father, husband, or son) for shelter, food, etc.; when men do not provide them these, women are left economically and socially vulnerable. Kabeer (2011) explains the incentives that emerge from patriarchal risk: “The risks and uncertainties attendant on women’s dependent status within such [patriarchal] structures paradoxically engender in them greater incentives to comply with, rather than challenge, male dominance” (p. 501). With very few viable alternatives, many women share a “reluctance to undermine marriage as an institution” (Kabeer, 2011, p. 521). Kandiyoti (1988) introduces the concept of “patriarchal bargains” to explore how women’s strategies are shaped by norms and customs. She notes that in classic patriarchy, “the cyclical nature of women’s power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 290). In a landmark study on life in rural Bangladesh, Hartmann and Boyce (2013 (1983)) note that, for many women, independence is a feared outcome that will bring destitution and necessitate begging for survival. The lack of options within a highly patriarchal context means that domestic violence may be tolerated (Bellows et al., 2015; Kabeer, 2011). Thus, few women seek recourse against abusers and fewer are able to leave abusive relationships (Schuler et al., 2008).

The few women in rural South Asia who seek help often do so by taking refuge at their father’s (or natal) home (Agarwal & Panda, 2007; Schuler et al., 2008). This option is conditional on women having parents, brothers, or other relatives who are willing and can afford to take them in. Bhuiya et al. (2003) notes that in Bangladesh there have been few preventative approaches focusing on family or community-based interventions. Bhuiya et al. (2003) also finds that much of the policy responses toward domestic violence focus either on ex-post, punitive measures or legalistic interventions. Schuler et al. (2008) shows that few Bangladeshi women attempt to seek formal recourse through the legal system due to corruption, unequal treatment by the court system and police, and poverty. The authors also find that many women

misunderstand Bangladesh's child custody laws. Schuler et al. (2008) argue that women stay rather than risk losing their children.

Within this context of patriarchal risk, women in Bangladesh face very high rates of domestic violence. Nationally representative data collected in Bangladesh's 2007 Demographic and Health Survey finds that 61 percent of Bangladeshi women reported experiencing domestic abuse by their partners (Fakir et al., 2016). Dalal et al. (2009), in a smaller survey in rural Bangladesh, find that 41 percent of married women suffered physical abuse in the past month. They also find that five percent of their sample report that their husbands restricted their food intake in the past month. Thus, social and cultural factors may put women at risk of remaining undernourished, even while their children's nutritional statuses improve.

3. Methods

To better understand the constraints that Bangladeshi women themselves identify as important for their nutrition, I partnered with Nijera Kori (NK) to undertake community-based research in 10 rural communities in northern Bangladesh. NK is a non-hierarchical, non-service providing organization in Bangladesh that supports landless peasants in organizing for change. Nijera Kori, which translates to “we do it ourselves,” takes a grassroots approach to identifying and changing wider structures and policies to the benefit of its landless members (Lewis, 2017). Over the past ten years, NK has partnered with researchers to carry out community-based research (see Cons & Paprocki, 2010; Paprocki & Cons, 2014). This community-based research model involves, first, a dialogic collaboration with NK members to identify key factors in their community to explore in research, and second, open-ended interviews.

We spent five days working with twelve female members and two male Nijera Kori members drawn from two districts: Gaibanda and Rangpur. These districts, two of the most impoverished areas within rural Bangladesh, were selected because their residents commonly experience seasonal hunger (*monga*), generally during November–December. Over the course of several days, this group of NK members described the role of gender in mediating agriculture to nutrition linkages, how nutritional decisions are made in their families, and which aspects mattered most to them. We collaboratively discussed rural Bangladeshi women's – and their husband's – perspectives on nutrition, household tensions, and sources of power. Through this dialogue, we identified a variety of common factors influencing nutrition (e.g., poverty and sanitation (see Headey et al., 2015)). But NK members also identified food as a common trigger of IPV, which has been relatively overlooked in quantitative work on women's outcomes. Given this initial finding, we implemented a series of research protocols to minimize harm to our respondents, discussed in detail below.

Following this dialogue, we selected the ten most effective interviewers (3 women and 1 man from Rangpur district and 5 women and 1 man from Gaibanda district) to be community researchers.⁶ We provided training on basic research methods such as conducting open-ended interviews, using digital voice recorders, and observing human subjects protocols and research ethics. The community researchers then returned to conduct research in their home communities. Each researcher had one-on-one discussions,

recorded with digital audio recorders, with community members about gender, power, and nutrition. For the interviews, our starting question was “Tell me about what you ate last night.” From this question, researchers carried out an open-ended conversation about food and decision making.⁷

Community researchers, as local community members and “insiders”, can more easily break through some of the barriers that can occur when wealthier, urbanized researchers talk with the extreme poor. The interviews provide a unique view of what issues matter to interviewees and particularly, as Nijera Kori members are landless and often marginalized themselves, to marginalized groups within broader communities.⁸ The sample of 134 individuals was quasi-random. Female community researchers interviewed 110 women from their own and nearby villages, using a snowball technique. Male community researchers similarly interviewed 24 men. During the research, community researchers regularly debriefed with us about who they interviewed. We tracked basic demographic information on age, marital status, number of children, and wealth. Toward the end of the fieldwork period, researchers purposively sampled additional community members who were not well-represented in our initial sample.⁹ About 25 percent of our sample were NK members; about 65 percent described experiencing food and nutrition insecurity recently. Because we purposely conducted this research in a *monga* affected area, this rate may be higher than in other parts of rural Bangladesh. Interviews occurred after the boro rice harvest, in May.

We aimed to follow best practice on ethical research of domestic violence as laid out by Ellsberg and Helse (2002), given the context and resources available in rural Bangladesh. Over the course of the training, we collectively discussed locally appropriate and inappropriate ways to have engage in discussions where violence may emerge as a topic. First, consistent with institutional review board standards, researchers explained that women did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and could end the interview at any time. Second, to avoid pressuring women, researchers were trained not to ask about violence unless a respondent brought it up first; researchers would ask follow up questions if it emerged as respondents described their lives. Third, researchers interviewed women alone to avoid antagonizing possible perpetrators. When private locations could not be identified, community researchers returned later. Fourth, researchers provided respondents contact information of local female Nijera Kori employees who had been briefed about our research and were equipped to talk with respondents about possible avenues of support. There are no domestic violence shelters or outreach services in these areas in rural Bangladesh (indeed, we know of no such services in rural Bangladesh in general). Because our community researchers resided in the same communities, respondents could also later approach them to request support from Nijera Kori. Each evening, we carefully screened recorded interviews to ensure the researchers followed the above protocols.

⁷ By utilizing an inductive methods of open-ended interviews, we left open the possibility of findings that had been previously overlooked in the literature. Researchers were trained to ask follow up questions emerging from the initial question, including questions such as “Who prepared the meal? What was grown and what was purchased? Was there enough to go around? Who allocated portions? Why was it done this way?” etc. Most respondents answered only a subset of the questions. Researchers were trained to delve deeply into household issues by asking for examples and discussing whether there is household tension around an issue, rather than briefly covering many topics.

⁸ I appreciate an anonymous reviewer raising this point.

⁹ While Nijera Kori members may have most affinity with poor and marginalized households, we ensured the sample included other households as well. Our review of the interviews does not indicate a greater willingness to respond in depth by age, marital status, number of children, or wealth.

⁶ Village names are suppressed, and pseudonyms are used for confidentiality. Interviews ranged from 20 min to 90 min; most were between 35 and 45 min.

4. Findings

While numerous formal definitions of food insecurity exist (see Jones et al., 2013), here, I use food and nutrition insecurity to capture the regular experience of some combination of the following: (1) eating less nutritious or less preferred meals, (e.g., only rice or rice, chili, and salt) to feel full, (2) asking, borrowing, or begging for food, (3) decreasing own or other adult portions, (4) decreasing the portions of children, and (5) skipping meals. The five characteristics are similar to the reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI), a household level measure of food insecurity (see Maxwell, Caldwell, & Langworthy, 2008). Nearly all respondents who described using these coping strategies, also described subjective hunger pangs and or worry about finding enough to eat. They also tended to raise concerns about the harm of eating less and low quality foods to their health and wellbeing. This subjective concern about lack of nutritious foods is what leads to my use of “food and nutrition insecurity.” In a departure from the rCSI, I focus on individuals within households, meaning one person may experience food insecurity while another in the same household does not. This approach supports identifying the impacts of domestic violence on food and nutritional security.

In the empirical findings below, all interviews are with Muslim women, unless otherwise noted. The cases discussed focus on IPV by husbands. While community researchers were trained to not ask informants whether they experienced domestic violence, numerous women in our sample volunteered that they had. Out of the 110 women who were interviewed, 25 indicated they had experienced some form of violence, primarily IPV. Other forms of domestic violence (e.g., between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) occur but are less common. Given that approximately 61 percent of Bangladeshi women experience domestic violence (Fakir et al., 2016), we would expect roughly 67 women in our sample experienced violence; this means that more than one-third of the probable number of women experiencing violence in our sample discussed it. There are at least two reasons for women’s willingness to discuss this issue. First, community researchers are members of the informants’ communities. Domestic violence in rural, small villages is often an open-secret, if not entirely public (Rao, 1997; Kabeer, 2011). Many women discussed their exposure to violence as a matter of daily life. Second, domestic violence is common. In our interviews, women discussing violence describe feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, and being demeaned; they do not appear to be shamed or embarrassed.¹⁰

4.1. Poverty

Not surprisingly, in a context where seasonal hunger is commonplace, a primary source of family tension is food. For families living in poverty or on the edge, when income is short, decreasing the quality and or quantity of food prepared is often a first response (Maxwell et al., 2008). Many families in our sample cannot afford to eat more than rice, lentils, and some vegetables on a daily basis. Occasionally poor families eat fish, and more rarely, meat and milk. Ramjan Ali, a Muslim man, says that in his household, discussions about what to cook and purchase and whether to sell milk are what drive disagreements between himself and his wife. He explains, “In my house, food choices depend on income.” Nurphul, married with small children, agrees, “. . . regarding food. . . swearing, fighting take place. . . If our husbands do not lead a good life, how can we women [care for] our families?”

4.2. The violence of food norms

Respondents describe a broad continuum of experiences of and reflexivity about patriarchal social practices, including about food choices and food practices (Kabeer, 1999). Many women describe navigating social norms around food, including eating order and who eats what foods. In some instances, children get equal shares, while in others, daughters get less. In some cases, women eat with their spouses, while doing so is unimaginable for others. For some women, these norms are taken for granted. Other women express frustration or, over time, have changed this practice. One of our community researchers, Mohammeda, exclaimed during an enumerator training, “Even I give more [food] to my son than to my daughter!” While there is substantial variation in practices, in general, food norms tend to be biased against women, and in some cases, girls. As I show below, these biases regarding food norms are compounded by domestic violence.

Ramjan Ali, after describing his family’s poverty, discusses how food is divided and shared between himself, his wife and their nearly-grown daughter. Often there is not enough of the tastiest and protein-rich foods, such as fish, to go around. Ramjan Ali gets the largest portion. His wife never complains, although his daughter does. When that happens, Ramjan Ali explains “she cries and we need to help her to understand [that there is not enough].” Later, he explains more fully, “I can’t afford the required amount of food for all of us. [My wife and daughter] offer me more because I am a man. As I told you, I take less than the amount that I need to eat because I know the amount is not sufficient for us; at the same time, I realize they are offering me more from the insufficient amount of food.” Thus, in Ramjan Ali’s house no one gets an adequate amount of food. Ramjan Ali, however, as the household head, gets priority.

Some women readily state that men ought to eat first and consider sacrificing for others in their households as part of what being a woman is. Beauty, a Hindu woman with two nearly grown sons, explains that in her household, the men eat first because “They work so hard, they deserve it best and early. So, that is why I wait for them to finish. . . . I’m a woman, it is okay for me to starve.” She also says that her husband shares his leftovers with her if he doesn’t finish his share. Anju tells a similar story. Her husband is a share cropper and they struggle to feed their three daughters. Anju feeds their daughters first, and then her husband. When they can afford to eat some fish, she is careful with portions. She says, “I make sure my children have [fish] pieces first, as long as they are satisfied. Then my husband has his share. He asks me to take a share too but I insist that he is fed well first. If it lasts, I eat. Or else not. It usually does not last for all of us. . . . That’s the system in my house.”

In contrast to Anju and Beauty, who explain that it is their duty as women to sacrifice for their families, some women express frustration that their partners fail to provide enough food for them and their children. Gohin, mother of three children, explains that her husband “doesn’t feed us well. He only takes care of himself and [his parents]. What little food we have, I bring from my parents’ house. Sometimes, I skip meals to meet the needs of my children.” Although Gohin has limited resources to change her situation, she positions her hunger as (at least partially) a failure of her husband meet his responsibilities as a husband rather than her duty as a woman. In other words, she questions the norm that women ought to willingly eat last and last but has little recourse to change her situation.

Finally, other women eat meals together with their families. Some of these women reside in households that have changed their eating practices over time. Kalpana, a married woman with two grown children, recently became a founding member of a local Nijera Kori landless committee and decided to seek a position at a local rice mill. Now that she is earning a wage from the mill, she decides jointly with her husband what food to buy. She also spoke up for her right to eat with her family. She says “I used to feed my husband

¹⁰ The high rate of domestic violence is consistent with the experiences of our community researchers. During our training, four of the twelve female community researchers disclosed domestic violence, involving hospitalizations in two cases.

first, then I would eat the leftovers. . . . Now, we all sit together to eat.” Consistent with broader literature on outside income as a source of potential empowerment (Hidrobo, Peterman, & Heise, 2015; Kabeer, 1999), earning an income provided Kalpana with the ability to have more say about food preparation and eating order. Kalpana also, by raising the issue with her partner, denaturalized the common practice of eating last, which likely reflects her participation in Nijera Kori (Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2011).

For many women in our sample, food is both a cause of and solution to family tensions.¹¹ Respondents repeatedly drew links between IPV and eating practices and decisions over food purchases and consumption.

4.3. Pathways linking domestic violence and hunger

In this section, I consider the two common pathways highlighted in existing literature on nutrition and IPV: (1) food preparation and portions triggering “retaliatory” violence, and (2) withholding food as a form of violence. I then show that some women manage food insecurity and undernourishment, often, although not always, in an attempt to avoid violence.

4.3.1. Pathway: retaliatory violence

Respondents explain that they often experience – or, in the case of male respondents perpetrate – IPV around meal times, particularly the evening meal. The husbands of women in our sample return home for dinner after working outside the home, usually in manual day labor or agricultural work. If a spouse is looking for a reason to engage in violence, dinner presents the first opportunity; late meals, inadequate food portions, or the taste of food can trigger violence. Rukiya explains that if she is late cooking dinner, “He will beat me. The first thing he would ask me is what have I been doing for so long? Why I am so late that I could not cook?” Mohamed, a farmer who is married with three grown children, explains that he generally likes his wife’s cooking and points out that while women can choose what to cook, they mostly prepare foods their husbands like. However, when his wife’s cooking does not meet his expectations, “I throw the plates away out of sheer anger, and then, leave for the market.” When the community researcher asks him if he does anything else, he responds “Hardly a few slaps. Not more than that.” Sometimes the violence is not physical, but involves verbal abuse or neglect. Ramjan Ali explains that if his wife cooks well, he appreciates it. But, “if it is not tasty (i.e., not cooked well) then I became angry and blame her.” When a meal that does not meet expected standards, men such as Mohamed and Ramjan Ali consider retaliation against women for poor cooking to be justified.

Sufiya, a mother of three children, also explains that her husband shouts at her when “I give more than one piece of food to my two sons while giving only one piece to him. Therefore, I extract some from their pieces and keep them for my husband. Even still, he keeps complaining.” While her husband shouts at her now, earlier in her relationship, things were worse. She explains that when she was first married and living in a joint family, “No one looked after me as to what food I got, etc. I at times have stolen foods. I used to ask why foods are all over and nothing left for me. . . . I used cry often. . . . My husband said if there is not enough for everyone, what could be done? I used to cry and tell myself, ‘Ok I will eat later after everyone else has eaten.’ . . . Now that my sons are grown up, the situation

has changed. I get more now because they often stand up to their father.” For Sufiya, her experiences with retaliatory violence have declined over the course of her marriage. In her case, leaving a joint family improved her ability to control what she eats and when, and so does having grown (male) children in the household who stand up to her husband on her behalf.

When food is a trigger for violence, it may or may not directly result in undernourishment. In some cases, such as earlier in Sufiya’s marriage, women may be hungry and, ultimately, undernourished because they are not allowed to eat enough. In cases when men retaliate against their partners for failing to prepare food or for preparing food to a standard different than their partners’ expectations (which may be fluid, particularly if food preparation serves as an excuse to engage in violence), women may experience short-term hunger through missed meals.

4.3.2. Pathway: withholding food as a form of power

While many of the examples of food-related violence relate to meal preparation or inadequate amounts of food, a second pathway involves the withholding of food as an extension of physical violence. The women in our sample who experienced this brutal combination also described why they stayed in or left their marriages. Women’s abilities to leave vary by several factors, such as having a natal family willing and able to support her; having children; having access to employment; having a support structure such as group membership; and having access to her own land (Panda & Agarwal, 2005). Without viable alternatives, many women cannot or do not wish to leave violent spouses.

Both Rohima and Joyinta have experienced this combination of violence and hunger. They each consider, but ultimately reject, leaving their husbands, primarily due to fear of losing custody of their children during a divorce (see also Schuler et al., 2008). Rohima explains that after beating her, to continue the punishment, her husband refused to buy food for either her children or her. Fearing loss of custody of her children and facing a lack of alternatives, she stays with him. She reflects, “Now I am bound [to my husband] by these two children. I have to suffer in silence. . . . [husbands] beat us so much but we don’t go away. They don’t bring food when they are angry, not even for the children.” Similarly, Joyinta, a Hindu Nijera Kori member, feels trapped by lack of alternatives. She tells a story from when her mother-in-law was still alive. Joyinta had missed breakfast. Feeling extremely hungry, her first opportunity to eat was in the afternoon. She began to eat even though rain had begun to fall, getting the laundry drying outside wet. Her mother-in-law accused her of leaving the clothes in rain intentionally, and told Joyinta’s husband. He then beat her and locked her up. She explains “He is a brute, a bully, and had I no children with him I would not have put up with this for so long.”

Both Joyinta and Rohima describe how extended family, neighbors, and, in Joyinta’s case, fellow Nijera Kori members offer support, and sometimes, have engaged directly with their husbands about the abuse. Joyinta describes how her neighbors brought a doctor to see her after one attack by her husband. She says, “One time, he beat me so bad that my eyes were swollen black and blue. Many of the locals came to visit me. . . . [A]ll the neighbors helped me a lot, they arranged to bring in the doctor and handle the money.” Thus far, for these two women, their support networks have not been enough to end the violence. Rohima explains “My cousins discuss [my husband’s behavior] with me. They even scold him for his actions, but does he ever pay heed to them? No.” These sources of support are critical for the lives and wellbeing of women in this sample.¹² Yet,

¹¹ No one in our sample discussed hoarding food or tasting food while cooking. Some Muslim respondents explained that to taste food while it was cooking demonstrates a lack of faith in Allah. The community researchers did not probe explicitly about tactics such as “stealing”, unsanctioned snacking, or other weapons of the weak to address hunger, although it is likely that some women rely on these. Hartmann and Boyce (2013 (1983)), for example, note that some women sell small amounts of food from harvest without their partners’ permission. A few women in our sample specifically recounted tactics used to secure more food during pregnancy.

¹² We have limited data to suggest that membership in social mobilization organizations, such as Nijera Kori (see Kabeer, 2011 and Lewis, 2017), could change norms around domestic violence. The open-ended interviews did not focus on this, although this important topic merits further research.

having support is not always enough to ensure adequate food and nutrition or a decrease or bring about an end to the violence, pointing to a complex set of interactions across factors including children, own income, and natal family, among others, that can mediate or mitigate violence.

Hasina is the only woman in our sample who left her marriage willingly and who identified abuse as the reason why she returned to her natal home. Hasina was married to the son of a financially secure family and lived with her joint family. Explaining to the interviewer why she had no children, she said violence began early in her marriage, as did hunger. So, she decided to take birth control without her then-husband's knowledge. By avoiding becoming pregnant, she left open the opportunity to leave. She further explains that when she was married, her mother-in-law would allocate the food shares for everyone. She says, "That meant I had no ability to eat by my own will or when I wanted. I had whatever they let me have. . . . I was not allowed to have a say or check on the groceries whatsoever. I was not even allowed to look into the shopping bag!" After one beating left Hasina hospitalized, her father came to the hospital and paid for her hospital bills. Once she had recovered, she divorced her husband and returned to her father's house. Her own natal household is also financially secure and willing to take her in. Returning to a natal family, especially with children, increases the financial burden for a woman's natal family, something Hasina feels acutely. At her father's house, she explains she can eat as she wishes but she also is frustrated that she cannot live independently or provide more financial support to her elderly father. It is worth noting that while poverty can amplify how violence affects food security and nutrition, not all poor respondents experience violence. Hasina's case also shows that the withholding of food also occurs in financially well-off situations.

In contrast to Hasina's case, impoverished natal families may only be able to support their daughter for a short period. Women may leave their homes while partners "cool off," but expect to return after a few days, weeks, or months. Sima's husband became abusive early in her relationship, and her father asked her to divorce him. She refused, saying she would just have to marry someone else, but returned to her natal home for a while. When she became pregnant with her third child, her husband decided that he did not want the child and beat Sima. He also did not allow her to return to her natal home as punishment for becoming pregnant. Her mother, concerned for the health of her daughter, left nutritious food at supportive neighbors' houses for Sima to eat during her pregnancy. Her mother also offered to keep the child once it was born, but, now widowed, could not afford to take in Sima and her two other children. Sima decided to keep her child; her mother has left for Dhaka, and Sima remains with her husband.

These findings of withholding food in conjunction with physical abuse are consistent with other findings in the literature on domestic violence and hunger and nutrition. Much of the domestic violence literature on recourse seeking considers why or what factors enable women to leave violent relationships. Hasina, for example, could be considered a "heroic survivor" (Meyers, 2011). However, unlike other women in the sample, Hasina is without children and has a financially comfortable natal family she could return to, both of which contributed to her decision to leave. Thus, while she is certainly agentic, she also had the necessary support structures that made her agency less burdened relative to Rohima, Joyinta, and Sima. As Rohima, Joyinta, and Sima's cases demonstrate, there are many reasons why women cannot leave. This opens the less-explored question of how does living with a violent partner influence hunger and undernourishment?

4.3.3. Complicating pathways: navigating violence via burdened agency

Thus far, these findings bear out other studies of nutrition and gender-based violence. Yet, other narratives in the study yield a more nuanced understanding. In the face of violence, many women report making burdened decisions about food and nutrition, including exposing oneself to IPV in response to extreme hunger or going hungry to avoid IPV and conflict. This suggests that women make conscious decisions about food practices to better navigate the threat and/or experience of domestic violence. Thus, the causal nature of the above pathways may hold in some cases. However, the findings below show that women with burdened agency make tradeoffs, unsettling the implicit causality in the pathways.

Some women describe eating less or eating less nutritious items not only to ensure there was enough for other members but also, explicitly, to avoid conflict. As Majeda, a young widow with two small children, describes, food can be a release valve to address family tension. Majeda explains that early in her marriage, she lived in a joint family. Her responsibility was to serve her in-laws and her husband. She often gave to her in-laws the tastiest foods (fish, meat, and vegetables, to her in-laws) from what would have been her portion. She did this to keep them from complaining that she had not given them an equal share. Her husband would get angry that she would not take some for herself, but she would tell him "I served enough to make sure no one complains of getting less. I gave up my portion so that I could give the same to everyone."

Panjeri describes how she decided to ask for more food, even though she knew it could result in violence. She explained that when she was first married and living with her in-laws, she was served last. "They had the privilege to eat first. After all were finished, the leftover pieces were given to me. At times, I had to return my mother's house due to hunger. . . . I asked my husband to work as a day laborer to earn more money but he refused and assaulted me. . . . My mother-in-law asked 'Why do you talk so much?' I replied, 'I need food to live.'" Panjeri's last sentence highlights the desperation leading her to request that her spouse work more. By deciding to stand up for what she needs, Panjeri made a burdened decision, exposing herself to violence. In doing so, she is neither a passive victim, nor heroically exiting an abusive relationship. Instead, in a violent environment, she is navigating amongst difficult choices.

In the following three cases of burdened agency, women consider their own food and nutrition as secondary or tertiary concerns. That is, women seek to use their limited agency to avoid violence or to assist their children. However, these choices come at the expense of their own food security and nutritional status.

Sheuli, a mother of two school-aged daughters, keeps poultry and earns a bit of money of her own. She explains that she eats less and rarely eats nutrient rich foods, like milk and eggs, in order to use her poultry-earnings to keep her children in school. She says, "If I need 500 Taka (\$6.50 USD) for their educational support then we compromise with food expenses. . . . Even if we have to eat rice with [only] chilis, we do. I would rather suffer now to get the good days that will come when they are literate." She further explains that she sacrifices for her children but does not discuss either the need for more money for food or her own hunger with her husband, because if she raises the issue, "he will beat me at night." By feeding herself and her daughters less, she can keep her daughters in school without antagonizing her partner.

Miliya, a worker at a rice mill and a mother whose son is not yet grown, earns an income of her own. She explains, "Sometimes there isn't much [food]. So, my son gets the biggest share and as a parent

should, I skip the meal.” Yet, she also makes sure that her husband gets a share equivalent to her son’s and does not ask her husband to eat less. While she explains that parents ought to sacrifice for their children, only she does so. She was once beaten so badly by her husband that she was left partially blind and is unwilling to press him about their food budget for fear of angering him.

Rokeya lives with her husband and two children, although at the start of their marriage, she lived with her in-laws as well. Her husband had once beaten her with a stick until she fainted. As a result, she now has chronic pain. To avoid pointing out to her husband that there is not enough to eat, Rokeya’s tactic is to eat last. Her family rarely has enough money to purchase meat or fish. When they can afford these foods, she splits them among her husband and children. She explains, “If I eat with them he might ask me why I am not sharing the same food.” By eating last and alone, she can hide from her husband that she eats less and different foods than the rest of the family, even though she knows eating less than she needs is harmful to her health. Her children are also aware that she gives them more food than she herself eats. She says, “My children understand that I give them all the food. They ask me again and again to eat some from their share; they don’t listen to me if I refuse. Then, I eat a little from there and that is all for me. We demand equality of men and women but it will never happen.” Rokeya also spoke of how a few days prior to the interview, she had a sweet pumpkin that she could use to make a dessert. She mentioned to her son that she needed milk and sugar to do so. “My son started asking his father to buy sugar and milk. To avoid any conflict, I interrupted my son before he finished asking.” By shutting down the conversation about the sweet pumpkin, Rokeya avoided exposing both her son and herself to her husband’s violence.

The women described in this section all live with extremely violent partners and all experience hunger. However, rather than being passive actors, each of them demonstrates burdened agency. Rokeya, Sheuli, and Miliya describe forgoing food as a means of navigating violent environments. Indeed, it is likely that many other women in our sample use similarly adaptive tactics that reflect the limited choices they have. These sorts of meaningful actions are not captured by narratives of either passive suffering or dramatic action. Yet, these quotidian practices critically contribute to nutritional security and insecurity.

5. Conclusion

This paper is limited to exploring IPV and food, and its effects on rural women’s nutritional status. There are other triggers of IPV in our sample not discussed here, including demanding the right to inherit land, opposing extra-marital affairs, and opposing a husband marrying a second wife. The risk of domestic violence also changes over a woman’s life course, and is mediated by a variety of factors, such as access to natal and social support, earning potential through formal and informal work, adult children in the home, and access to and depth of participation in social mobilization organizations, such as Nijera Kori (Kabeer, 2011). The interactions among these factors and their salience merit further research. Moreover, this paper considers tactics within the household, and does not consider broader exit-related strategies such as migration to Dhaka, which could reshape the patriarchal bargains that women face (Kandiyoti, 1988). These are all important avenues for future research and for future policy interventions.

Many women in our sample report feeding their partners, in-laws, and children first and better food, and eating whatever is left. These women do this because they want what is best for their families, want to manage potential conflict, and/or feel they have no choice. Thus, some children consume more diverse diets and more calories than their mothers. This means that we should be cautious

about assuming undernutrition improvements observed for children in Bangladesh (Headey et al., 2015) necessarily translate to improvements for their mothers. A recent study of 30 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, found that 74 percent of underweight women resided in households with a male head who is not underweight (Brown, Ravallion, & van de Walle, 2017). Continuing declines in poverty will alleviate some of the pressures experienced by women to forfeit their own food and nutrition security. However, social norms around eating order and portions also contribute to some women’s reluctance or inability to demand that more of the family budget be allocated to food. Further research could support a broader understanding of the dynamics and drivers of varying nutritional outcomes within households.

The findings presented here offer a more complete understanding of how domestic violence influences women’s food security. Bellows and Jenderedjian (2016) have pointed out violence against women “is rarely acknowledged or anticipated when attempting to address women’s particular over-representation among the food and nutrition insecure” (p. 108). I show that domestic violence, often combined with poverty, directly contributes to undernourishment of some women, and in some cases, their children. Many women report food preparation and practices as triggering violence from their partners and that they experience hunger when perpetrators withhold food.

I further find that, in the context of violence, many women make burdened decisions about food and nutrition. Cases such as Sheuli’s, Miliya’s, and Rokeya’s disrupt the dominant narratives about pathways between domestic violence, hunger and nutrition. Each respondent describes how feeding herself becomes a second or third order priority, after attempting to avoid violence and caring for their children. In other words, in violent environments with few “good” choices, some women choose to make decisions at the expense of their own nutritional status. That is, some women choose hunger. This means we should not presume that, in situations of undernutrition and domestic violence, women are powerless.

There are two primary implications of this research: one methodological, and one theoretical, both of which can help us to better understand the ways in which women navigate everyday life. First, from a methodological perspective, these findings point to the need for incorporating qualitative research more into discussions of program and policy. Much of the quantitative literature has identified violence against women as an important issue for the nutritional status of themselves and their children. However, the causal mechanisms are often unclear (Temmerman, 2015). Community researchers, as local community members, can more easily break through some of the barriers that can occur when wealthier, urbanized researchers talk with the extreme poor and are uniquely placed to hear how women navigate complex choices. Community-based research often establishes a common point of departure between community researchers and interviewees, providing a view into what issues matter to marginalized groups within broader communities. Thus, participatory, qualitative methods can provide an understanding of how violence operates within households, how women navigate this violence, and how women conceptualize trade-offs they face – all of which are difficult to capture in quantitative research.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, burdened agency moves the discussion about domestic violence beyond who exits and who stays or identification of associational pathways. Burdened agency allows us to see that women engage in a continuum of activities to best manage limited resources in constrained, violent environments, suggesting these presumed-causal pathways between violence and nutrition may be of limited value. It also allows us to identify entry points into addressing violence against women, many of whom in our sample face substantial patriarchal risk,

i.e., they do not have the resources or support structures to leave their partners. Further, not all women who experience violence related to food are impoverished. Thus, reducing food insecurity or poverty will likely not be enough to erase violence against women. Structural factors, including norms and laws, create a space of permissibility for violence (Heise & Kotsdam, 2015). Policies and programs that do not acknowledge these issues or women's burdened agency may miss why women are food insecure or undernourished and programs designed to address nutritional insecurity may be reduced or less effective.

Finally, to turn to the question of practice, this research points to the value of partnering with organizations who are already engaged in empowerment and consciousness-raising work with women and their partners. To that end, organizations like Nijera Kori are well situated to be both producers and consumers of this kind of research. Nijera Kori's training and advocacy work within communities has produced transformative effects at the community scale in other arenas (Kabeer, 2011; Paprocki & Cons, 2014). Moreover, participating in organizations such as Nijera Kori has allowed women to reflect on the social constraints on agency and violence and to theorize about what gender justice means to them (Kabeer, 2011). Thus, organizations like Nijera Kori, which focus on rights rather than on service provision, can provide a platform and space for women and men to collectively and separately engage in conversations about the norms around food and violence. Bringing these kinds of interventions to the table alongside more traditional nutritional programming may be important not only to improved food nutrition security but to the overall wellbeing and lives of women and their families.

Conflict of interest

IMMANA funded this project:

- Suneetha Kadiyala is director of the IMMANA grants program

Collaborators for the IMMANA project include:

- Marzia Fontana
- Sudha Narayanan
- Bharati Kulkarni

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Competitive Research Grants to Develop Innovative Methods and Metrics for Agriculture and Nutrition Actions (IMMANA Grants) and funded with UK aid from the UK government. Jason Cons, Marzia Fontana, Bharati Kulkarni, Patricia McLaughlin, Sudha Narayanan, Raj Patel, Varun Rai, seminar participants at the UT Austin's Center for Women and Gender Studies, the Population Research Center, the LBJ School of Public Affairs Colloquium, and the 2017 American Sociological Association meetings, four anonymous reviewers, and, especially, Khushi Kabir and Rezanur Rose Rahman of Nijera Kori provided valuable insights. Nirali Bakhla, Ankita Mondal, and Krushna Ranaware provided excellent field support. This project would not have been possible without the Gaibanda and Rangpur research teams and respondents. Any remaining errors are mine alone.

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